

Ontario plan puts more than 2,000 Toronto daycare spots at risk

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EXCERPTS

Toronto could lose at least 2,184 infant and toddler child care spaces — and fees would skyrocket — under proposed provincial child care changes aimed at addressing 12-month maternity leaves and full-day kindergarten, according to a city report.

A minimum of 325 infant spaces and 1,859 toddler spots would disappear while costs would soar by almost \$21 million under the plan to change child care age groupings, group sizes and staff-child ratios, says the report to be discussed by the city's community development committee Wednesday.

It means fees would rise by 20 per cent to 40 per cent, pushing the median cost of infant care to almost \$2,100 a month and toddler care to \$1,850. At those costs, combined with new age restrictions and group sizes, many centres would have trouble keeping infant rooms open, the report notes.

"If the regulations are implemented, the licensed child care system will decrease in size while the cost of delivering the service will increase," says the city report.

Critics say the province has proposed the changes without the benefit of detailed figures on how it would affect daycare access and cost.

At a time when Toronto's daycare fees are the highest in Canada and licensed space for infants and toddlers is scarce, "the proposals are contrary to the provincial goal of increasing affordability and access to licensed child care," the report adds.

The proposed changes, first released for consultation in February, have been met with a flood of community and parental opposition.

More than 9,000 parents responded to a city survey about the proposed regulatory changes, with most opposed to the new age groupings and group sizes, the report says.

However, the city, parents and academics support the province's proposal to increase the ratio of fully trained early childhood educators per classroom, from one out of three workers to two out of three — despite the added cost.

"We totally support the addition of qualified staff," said Elaine Baxter-Trahair, general manager of Toronto children's services. "It's great for the program, for employment, and it's wonderful for the quality and for the children."

"But we have concerns about the group sizes and the ratios simply because instead of improving access, they inadvertently reduce access."

The province has received "extensive" feedback on the proposed regulations, said a spokeswoman for Education Minister Liz Sandals.

"We have heard the concerns that have been raised, and we will be working with the sector to make changes to reflect the concerns heard as we continue to modernize Ontario's child care and early years system," Nicole McInerney said in a statement.

Under the proposed changes, infant rooms would be restricted to babies up to 12 months old instead of 18 months. Babies would enter toddler rooms when they turn a year old and would move to pre-school rooms at two years old.

While a three-month-old will be part of a smaller group with more staff under the proposed system, a 13-month-old will be placed in a larger group (for toddlers) with fewer staff and other children as old as 24 months.

Sandals has cited one-year maternity benefits as the rationale for changes to infant age groupings. But many low-income families, students and self-employed parents can't take advantage of those benefits. And most centres fear the change will make infant rooms unviable.

"In terms of accessibility, we are going to lose spaces which will make it harder to find care," said Toronto mother Lindsay Siple, president of the parent board at Plains Road Child Care centre near Woodbine Ave. and O'Connor Dr. "And my fees are going to go up."

Siple, who has a daughter in kindergarten and a three-year-old in the daycare's preschool room, is expecting her third child in September. As a self-employed public health consultant who may need care when her baby is younger than 12 months old, losing the infant room in her centre would be devastating.

"Finding infant care is already like winning the lottery," she said. She is one of more than 50 families with unborn children on her centre's waiting list for 2017.

Siple is also worried her new baby may not be developmentally ready for a toddler room at 12 months and that the older children in that room would also lose out.

"I can see that the older children wouldn't necessarily be getting the care that they need because the focus would be on the safety of the younger children," she said.

Ward 31 Councillor Janet Davis said she hopes the province reconsiders the regulatory changes and instead focuses on "the expansion of quality child care parents need."

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Region: Ontario [3]

Tags: quality [4]

accessibility [5]

spaces [6]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/spaces>